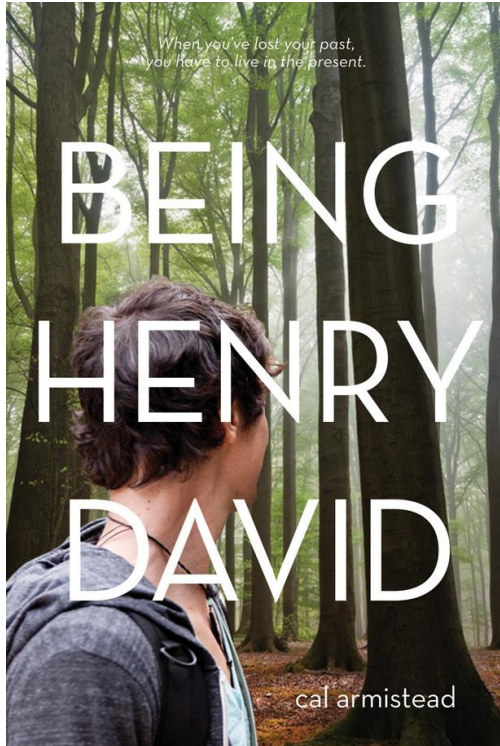


Discussion Guide to Being Henry David by Cal Armistead



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Ages: 13 and up, Grades: 7 and up

Seventeen-year-old “Hank” has found himself at Penn Station in New York City with no memory of anything—who he is, where he came from, why he’s running away. His only possession is a worn copy of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. And so he becomes Henry David—or “Hank”—and takes first to the streets, and then to the only destination he can think of—Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts.

Cal Armistead’s remarkable debut novel is about a teen in search of himself. Hank begins to piece together recollections from his past. The only way Hank can discover his present is to face up to the realities of his grievous memories. He must come to terms with the tragedy of his past, to stop running, and to find his way home.

Starred Review in *Kirkus Reviews*

★“Hank earns sympathy and respect from readers, but Armistead doesn’t let him off easy. Rescue is not an option, but Thoreau’s spare words, focusing on what truly matters, lighten the darkness. This compelling, suspenseful debut, a tough-love riff on guilt, forgiveness and redemption, asks hard questions to which there are no easy answers.”

Common Core State Standards

CCR-RL.8-12.1,2,3,4,5,6,10

Discussion Questions

1. When he wakes up at Penn Station, Hank has a gut fear of the police, and decides to trust a “fuzzy instinct” that he’s better off avoiding them. Why do you think he has this fear? Is he right to trust it?
2. What do you think about Hank’s friendship with Jack and Nessa? Is it harmful or helpful?
3. Reading the words of Thoreau in the alley, Hank experiences “the closest feeling, so far, to home.” Why do you think he responds this way?
4. How is the theme of running used and repeated in this book?

5. When Hank gets too close to painful memories, “something dark lurches in my chest like a beast waking from a deep sleep.” What is the beast?
6. When Hank finally gets to Walden, he sees an apparition of Thoreau, who laughs at him and points at the sign with his quote about “the essential facts of life.” Why did Thoreau laugh?
7. Thomas claims an affinity to Thoreau as a fellow “free spirit and rebel.” In what ways do you think Thoreau was rebellious for his time? How would he be considered a rebel today?
8. What are the issues at the core of the problems with Hank’s (Danny Henderson’s) real family?
9. During his night at the Concord library, Hank has a horrifying vision of statues speaking and crashing off their pedestals to reveal disturbing contents. What do you think the statues represent in Hank’s life?
10. “Carpe diem” is a term that’s mentioned numerous times and is also the name chosen for Hank and Hailey’s band. How is the concept of “seize the day” a recurring theme in the book?
11. One of Thoreau’s core beliefs is for “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.” The way Hank describes this is: “Don’t take more from the world than you need. Don’t need more than you take.” How could someone live simply today?
12. At the Battle of the Bands, both Hank and Hailey have issues to overcome. How do they end up helping each other?
13. Near the end of the book, Hank climbs Mount Katahdin. Why is this leg of his journey so important? What does he learn in the process?
14. At the end of the book, Jack is in the hospital for a drug overdose, and Suzanne has vowed to take Nessa to social services for help. Where do you think Jack and Nessa are, six months to a year after the ending of the book?
15. Hank ultimately concludes that finding the book *Walden* at Penn Station was likely a random event. But did it end up being a clue to his identity after all? Where could the book have come from? Who might have left it there, and why?
16. Hank says, “I may not be Thoreau reincarnated, but I bet I could live the rest of my life as if I was.” How do you think Hank might try and accomplish that?



About the Author

Cal Armistead has written extensively for radio, newspapers and magazines, including *The Chicago Tribune*, *Shape Magazine*, *Body & Soul Magazine*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Chicken Soup for Every Mom's Soul*, and others. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine, works at an independent book store, is a voice-over actress, sings semi-professionally, and lives in a Boston suburb with her amazing husband and a dog named Layla. *Being Henry David* is her first novel.